

# The Tools and the Training for the Future

## Today's Plan for Tomorrow's Workforce

*Maj. Gen. Thomas J. Owen, USAF*

*Former Commander, Warner Robins Air Logistics Center*

**T**ransformation is a big word in the Department of Defense—transformation not only in DoD operations, but in recruiting, training, and retaining human capital. Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, Air Force Materiel Command, is piloting multiple innovative initiatives to interest, attract, recruit, and train future Air Force employees. This community and base partnership begins at the local Museum of Aviation. Last year, 46,000

students from kindergarten to 12th grade participated in museum programs designed to make science, technology, and aerospace fun and interesting for all ages. Working with secondary schools, the base has created a summer intern Youth Apprenticeship Program that allows students to gain firsthand experience with specific careers on the base. At the college level, certification programs, cooperative education (co-op) internships, and educational partnerships all pipeline graduates into jobs at the base. These cooperative base and community initiatives have a single unifying goal: Raise student awareness of the exciting careers available in the Air Force, preparing them to assume future Air Force jobs.

In March 2008, *Defense AT&L* interviewed Maj. Gen. Thomas J. Owen, then commander of Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, to obtain further details on how the center is implementing this innovative strategy.

**Q** Can you begin with an overview of your job and your responsibilities as commander, Warner Robins Air Logistics Center?

**Through a complex system of forecasting, we're able to let [technical colleges] know, "We're not doing as much sheet metal work these days as we were back in the 1980s. We're doing more high-tech material work, so we need you to expand your course offerings in that area."**

**A** I command the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center at Robins AFB, Ga. In that role, I oversee worldwide logistics support for C-130 and C-5 transport aircraft, F-15 fighters, and U-2 reconnaissance aircraft as well as sustainment for remotely piloted vehicles; Air Force helicopters; air-to-air missiles; surface motor vehicles; and high-technology airborne electronics, avionics, and electronic warfare requirements. ALC provides logistics support and sustainment for the E-8C Joint STARS weapon system through a contractor logistics support depot partnership. The center also oversees Global Reach Improvement Program modifications and share systems sustainment support for the C-17 transport aircraft. Warner Robins is one of three Air Force logistics centers that sustain the Air Force warfighting team. It is the largest industrial complex in Georgia, employing a workforce of over 20,000 civilians, military members, and contractors.

**Q** *From your perspective, what are the big challenges and changes that Warner Robins might be facing in the future, and what is your strategy for facing those challenges and changes?*

**A** One primary challenge is planning and preparing for the long-range—10-plus years—future. When I arrived at the Warner Robins ALC, I began encouraging my leaders to first reflect on the past and then project into the future. For example, in the area of workforce development, the skill sets of many people who worked here in 1975 were very different from the skill sets needed today. If the workforce today had 1975 skills, we could not be successful.

So we took an initial look at the skills we developed in the 1970s—sheet metal mechanics, hydraulic mechanics, basic electronic maintenance technicians, back shop work on flaps and slats, and so on. But how many people did we have in 1975 who were software technicians or software engineers and were knowledgeable on digital electronic warfare systems as well as global-positioning-system-driven capabilities? Not very many. We examined workforce changes in 1985, 1995, 2005, and then started thinking into the future in 10-year increments.

If you look into the future at the workforce—not the number of people, but the composition of the workforce—it leads you to certain conclusions. Then you start to populate that workforce by looking at the kind of airplanes and other systems we support today: the C-17, the F-22, a much-modernized C-5 with updated avionics and engines, not to mention avionics upgrades on old workhorses like the C-130.

From there, we established a better foundation for our requirements and projected skill needs to support future

technologies. With this information in hand, we partnered with the wonderful communities here in Georgia to communicate our workforce skill needs for the future—both technical and professional. If we know we will need to double our hiring of software engineers in two to four years, we can't communicate that in the spring and expect local colleges to deliver trained graduates instantly, or even next year. We need to project workforce requirements years in advance to allow time for the secondary schools, colleges, and universities to develop those individuals.

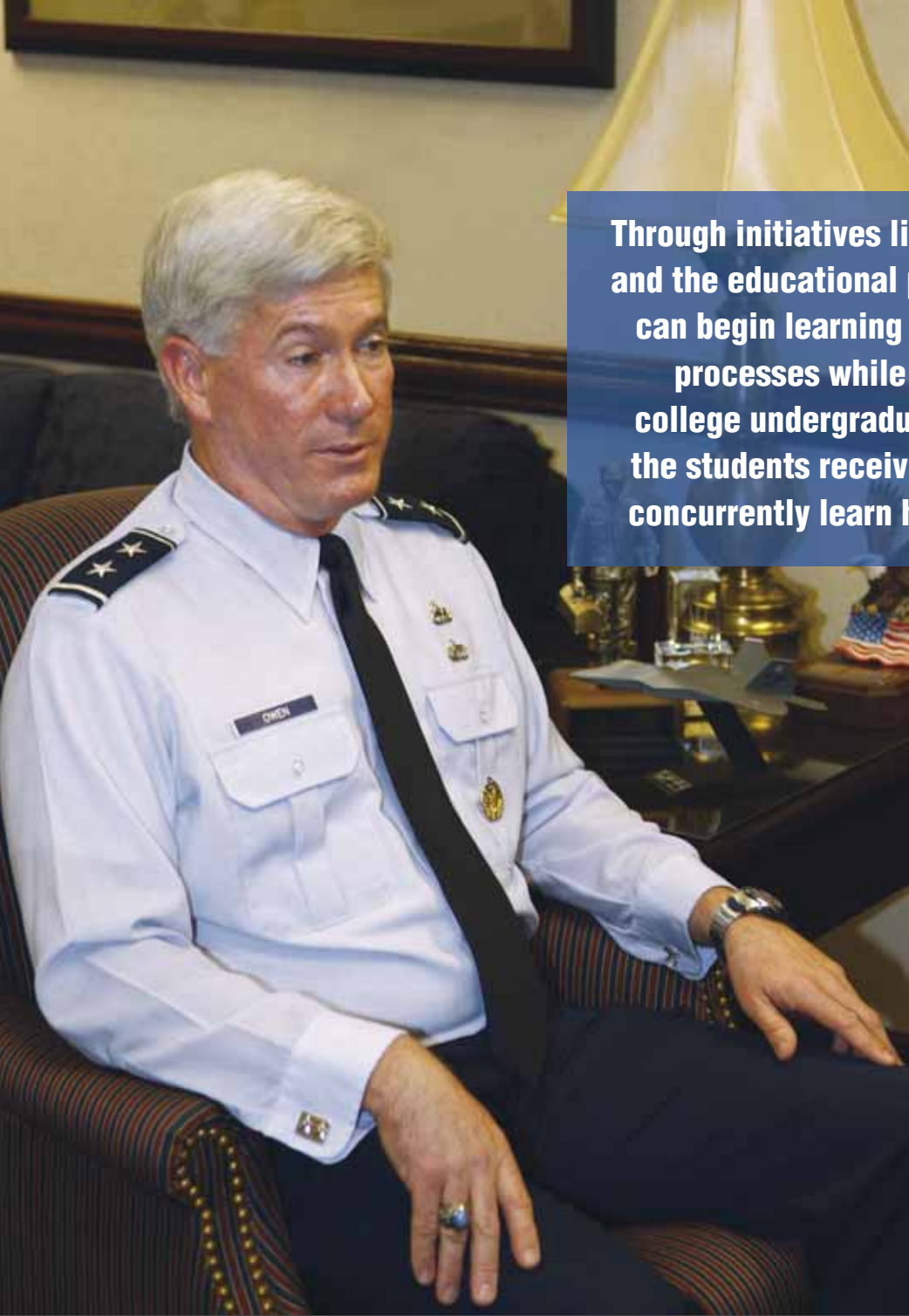
A great example of how we are addressing our workforce challenge is in contracting. Our director of contracting, Patsy Reeves, told me about a year ago that we would need to double the number of contracting personnel at Robins Air Force Base in the next few years to accommodate the new workload scheduled to relocate here. To meet that challenge, we are proactively partnering with local colleges to initiate programs that will provide the trained workforce pipeline we will need to meet future mission requirements.

**Q** *A challenge currently facing the Department of Defense is the aging of the workforce. How does this challenge affect Warner Robins Air Logistics Center specifically, and how is the center proactively working to address this challenge? What type(s) of succession plans are being made to ensure that future leaders are developed?*

**A** My personnel experts tell me that in the next five years, 40 percent of the workforce at Robins AFB will be eligible to retire. That's a startling statistic, but I balance my concern with the realization that many civil servants choose to work beyond their retirement eligibility date. Every few months, I sign several certificates for 40 and even 50 years of service. Likewise, as I look around the base, I have a relatively balanced workforce in terms of age. We have young people, middle-aged employees, and we have some people like me who have white hair. So while I take seriously the civil service retirements on the horizon, we are working hard to maintain an age balance.

In fact, 46 percent of the civilian employees here at ALC today have less than 10 years of service. That's pretty impressive. Seventeen percent have between 11 and 20 years; 30 percent have between 21 and 30 years of service; and 6 percent have over 30 years with the government. That's a pretty balanced workforce. While the 40 percent eligible to retire is an accurate statistic, I know not all who are eligible will choose to retire.

Even with a fairly balanced workforce at Robins, we must look to the future needs of the aerospace career field and the right skill sets, not only for Robins, but also for indus-



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est in aerospace is lost. Today, there are thousands of children who have attended college and technical school and are benefiting from their past experiences at the Museum of Aviation.

Looking further into the future, Robins' personnel and training team recently hosted the Middle Georgia Work-Ready Aerospace Partnership (mgWRAP) Solutions Summit here at Robins. Over 100 leaders from industry, education, government, and community organizations attended. This summit was a major step in a regional initiative that focused on Middle Georgia's aerospace workforce and served as a call to action to develop future aerospace workers for the region's employers with the skill sets needed for our future challenges. Summit participants put the emphasis on educational

try. Let me start with our youngest potential recruits and the great partnership we have with the Warner Robins community that allows us to capture student interest in base employment. It starts with the Museum of Aviation and the fantastic experiences this team of educators provide in their K-12 programs. In the last year, the museum logged more than 126,000 hours of contact time, educating more than 45,000 students. These hours include tours; practical experiences; and classroom time, in which students learn about science, math, and aerospace applications. And why do we do all this? Because if you wait until college, the opportunity to capture a student's inter-

programs to fill the pipeline with well-prepared students to replenish the aerospace workforce.

We already have multiple co-op and intern programs that expose high school and college students to the base and introduce them to the great career opportunities available here. We actively recruit in engineering, finance, contracting, and acquisition management. One innovative educational partnership we've established with Macon State College, the Aerospace Industry Committee, and the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) allows college undergraduates to complete three government contracting and Ac-



quisition Professional Development Program electives to develop ready-to-work contracting professionals. Likewise, we also have partnerships with seven technical colleges in Georgia and one in Alabama. Through a complex system of forecasting, we're able to let them know, "We're not doing as much sheet metal work these days as we were back in the 1980s. We're doing more high-tech material work, so we need you to expand your course offerings in that area." In addition, we have a new summer science and engineering intern program to expose engineering students to exciting aerospace career opportunities.

That's just the top-level look, but it is exciting to see the end-to-end programs we are creating with the community to reach students of all ages and those ready to be hired, and the continuing education and training once people are part of the workforce.

You asked about succession plans for developing future leaders. Dr. Steve Butler, my center executive director, chairs a senior leader team focused precisely on that goal. We fill mid- to senior-level leader vacancies throughout ALC as local career-broadening opportunities. This process re-aligns leaders into new career fields to give them a broader strategic perspective to prepare them to assume greater responsibility in the future.

**Q** *Not only does the Department of Defense face the challenge of an aging workforce, but it also faces difficulties in retention, and there is a dramatic shift in skill sets needed throughout the department. How does this affect Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, and how is the center proactively working to address these items?*

**A** We work hard to hire the right people, but once they are here, we also need to make sure we can retain them. There are a couple of principles that I believe are key. First, we must continue to let people know that what they are doing is very important, and when they go home at night, they know they are part of defending our nation.

The Air Force refers to all people employed by the Air Force as airmen. I held a commander's conference a few months ago and let our people know that I consider them all to be airmen, whether they wear a uniform or civilian clothes. When employees understand that what they are doing is vitally important to the security of our nation, they will find more meaning and satisfac-

tion in their job and tend to think twice before they go somewhere else.

In addition, we need to ensure we have good developmental programs for our people and that we provide the right education and training. I came into the Air Force in 1974 as a U.S. Air Force Academy cadet, and my training was pretty good for the time. The Air Force has continued to invest in my education and training to help me be more effective facing the challenges of 2008. The same principle applies for the rest of the workforce. All employee skills need to be updated for today's job requirements. We are forming continuing education programs through our DAU partnerships at Macon State College; as well as the expanded Acquisition Professional Development

Program curriculum offered through the local DAU satellite campus, which was established

thanks to the efforts of Frank Anderson [*president of DAU*] and Pat Hogan [*chief, Acquisition Career Management and Resources Division, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition*].

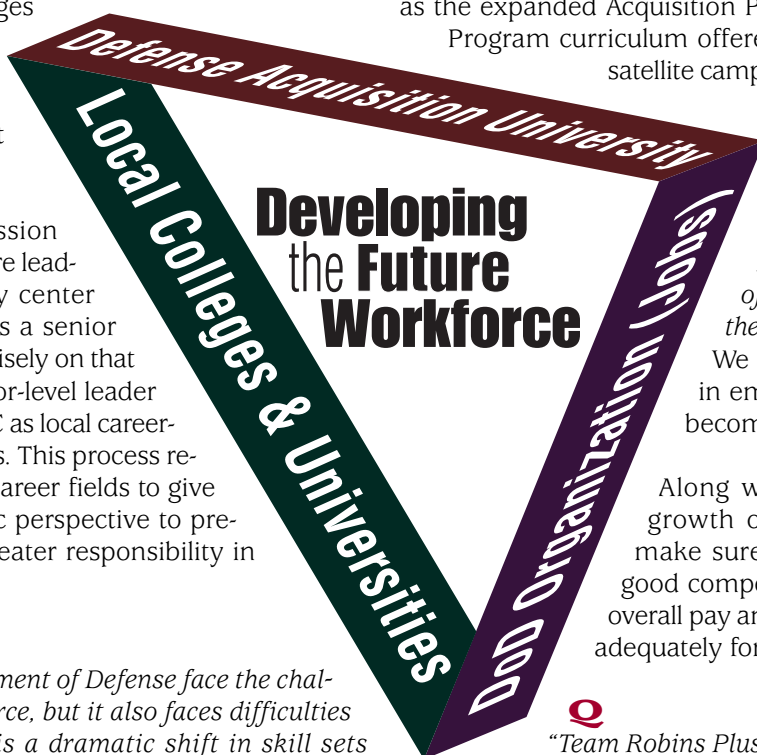
We find that when we invest in employee growth, retention becomes less of an issue.

Along with job satisfaction and growth opportunity, we need to make sure that our people have a good compensation package so their overall pay and compensation provides adequately for their needs.

**Q** *"Team Robins Plus" is often used to describe the community surrounding Warner Robins. Can you describe some ways you have supported and fostered this relationship?*

**A** Warner Robins and all of middle Georgia is blessed to have some of the most patriotic Americans anywhere. Since the founding of the base in the 1940s, middle Georgia residents have been great partners with this installation. Warner Robins, Ga., was originally called Wellston. The town agreed to change its name to Warner Robins at the request of the first base commander, Col. Charles E. Thomas. Col. Thomas' mentor was Brig. Gen. Augustine Warner Robins, and the colonel asked that the town name be changed so the base could also be named in honor of his mentor.

That initial community support for the installation is even stronger today. Indicative of that support is the Middle



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**M**aj. Gen. Thomas J. Owen is the former commander of Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, Air Force Materiel Command, Robins Air Force Base, Ga. He was responsible for worldwide logistics support for C-130 and C-5 transport aircraft, F-15 fighters, and U-2 reconnaissance aircraft as well as support for remotely piloted vehicles; Air Force helicopters; air-to-air missiles; surface motor vehicles; and high-technology airborne electronics, avionics, and electronic warfare requirements. He also oversaw comprehensive logistics support and sustainment of the E-8C Joint STARS and the C-17 transport aircraft. Warner Robins Air Logistics Center is one of three Air Force air logistics centers and the largest single-site industrial complex in the state of Georgia.



Owen entered the Air Force in 1978 as a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy. Early in his career, he worked on the B-52 Stratofortress and the KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft and later served as an F-15 Eagle maintenance supervisor. He has commanded an aircraft generation squadron maintaining F-16 Fighting Falcon and OA-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft; a maintenance squadron performing intermediate-level aircraft and munitions maintenance; and a combat logistics support squadron providing F-16 and F-4 Phantom aircraft battle damage repair, supply, and transportation support.

Owen was the first logistics group commander for the first and only wing operating the E-8C Joint STARS aircraft. For more than three years, he was director of the C-5 System Program Office at the San Antonio Air Logistics Center and Warner Robins Air Logistics Center. He has also served as director for the C-17 System Program Office and F-22A System Program Office, Aeronautical Systems Center, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Prior to becoming Commander of Warner Robins ALC, he was director of logistics, installations, and mission support at Headquarters, Air Education and Training Command.

Owen is currently serving as the director of logistics and sustainment, Headquarters, Air Force Materiel Command, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

Georgia Military Affairs Committee, which is an organization representing each of the 15 Chambers of Commerce in middle Georgia. Each individual Chamber of Commerce has a committee focused on ways to effectively partner with Robins AFB and ALC.

We have another group, the 21st Century Partnership, which is an independent organization of community supporters from a seven-county area surrounding the base. This group seeks out opportunities to support the base, such as providing a 21st Century Team Quality Award to recognize excellence and efficiency. Regularly, they ask for suggestions on how to recognize the efforts of the great men and women who work at Robins.

**Q** Can you talk about the recently formed partnership between Warner Robins, Macon State College, the Aerospace Industry Committee, and DAU? What are the benefits of the partnership, and what makes it so unique?

**A** The partnership formed with Macon State College, the Aerospace Industry Committee, and DAU has really been an exciting transformational initiative. While it is transformational, it is also very simple and makes us wonder why we haven't operated this way all along.

For years, local students attended college, specialized in a specific curriculum, then were hired by the base. At that point, we would tell them, "OK, you've learned the academic way in college, but the federal government does business by a unique set of rules." After they were hired, the process of teaching newly hired employees those unique laws and regulations and gaining expertise in their application would take five to six years.

Through initiatives like our co-op program and the educational partnership, students can begin learning federal government processes while completing their college undergraduate work. This way, the students receive college credit and concurrently learn how we do business. When they come to work on a permanent basis at Robins Air Force Base, they will be able to take on more responsibility much more quickly, shortening the lead time to produce proficient experienced employees.

This educational partnership could have happened only through cooperation between DAU, the Aerospace Industry Committee, Macon State College, and the base. While the trained graduates it produces



my purpose wasn't solely to fix airplanes, but also to help my people gain the skills to do their jobs well. Even today, I see my job is to give people four specific things: the time, the tools, the training, and the technical data/information necessary to tackle the challenges they are given.

As I progressed in my career and transitioned into program management assignments, I found out that the same principles apply when running an Aircraft System Program Office. Now that I command an ALC, these same principles still apply. I need to give my people those four enablers so they can get the job done.

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will greatly benefit ALC and Robins AFB, there are also advantages for our industry partners. Defense industry employees need familiarity with federal government contracting processes, and the college electives we are developing are also available to their employees. Having a common understanding of the rules and processes governing our business can only help us to have more effective partnerships.

**Q** *Many leaders throughout the acquisition community are looking at the challenges in the workforce and wondering what initiatives make the most sense. What do you recommend leaders need to do when it comes to developing the future workforce?*

**A** I've had a philosophy for years that I learned as a young Air Force maintenance officer. I realized back then that

When I arrived at Robins AFB in 2006 as the commander, I was so pleased to learn that the center operated on a foundational principle: "People First, Mission Always." I continue to endorse those priorities, and we operate that way today. If we take care of the people—through recruiting, retention, and rewarding performance—then they will, in fact, get the job done, and the mission will be successfully accomplished.

We're always looking forward toward how we need to adapt and improve in the future. As the commander of Warner Robins ALC, it is so heartwarming to see a workforce attitude, from entry-level employees to those who report directly to me, constantly striving to improve. This, I think, is our best practice—complete employee involvement in transformation and improving the ways we accomplish our jobs. We call it AFSO21—Air Force Smart Operations for the 21st Century.

**Q** *Thank you for your time, Maj. Gen. Owen.*